

THE ZEP BUSTER

by JOHN SCOTT DOUGLAS

If you want to be thrilled to the marrow; if you like blazing air stories; if you have any sympathy for the under dog—read this gripping yarn. Hot action! What more could you want?

BUD TALBOT'S CHERUBIC FACE blanched, and his heart sank as those two ex-cowboys approached his bunk in the barracks. Milt Laramy's phlegmatic countenance was odiously familiar to him; as was, also, the squat figure of Louie Rogers. Milt was huge of frame, loud of mouth and in all respects the swaggering braggadocio; while Louie, with his flattened nose, humorous mouth, and watery-blue eyes, was also a braggadocio of a less aggressive type.

"Well, if they ain't got the mama's boy here!" bellowed Milt, in his Bull of Bashan voice. "What're you doing here at Kelly field?"

Bud had looked somehow like a small boy who wanted to cry when he'd sighted his erstwhile tormentors of Spike Center, Arizona. He was short, slim, and immature looking. He had endeavored to hide his youth with a downy, flaxen mustache. "I'm instructor here," he answered quietly. "The youngest on the field!"

Milt's big mouth opened. "Well, I'll be damned!" he ejaculated incredulously. "If I'd a known they had babies in swaddling clothes here for instructors, I wouldn't a come!"

Bud flushed fiery red to the roots of his yellow mane, but said nothing.

"Remember the times I chased you when you was a delivery boy? You'd run if I made a face at you. Went up back alleys to deliver your groceries, didn't you? And remember the times I socked you because you tried to show us all up in studies?" Milt's thick lips twisted in a snarl. "Well, I'll do the same thing here if you get cocky! You may be a smart mama's boy, and you may have transferred here from West Point—but what counts over there is guts. And you ain't got any!"

Bud stiffened; he was not cowed in the least by the swaggering bully. "Laramy, I'll break you as quick

as I'd break another man if you don't know your stuff!"

"Is zat so?" Laramy taunted him. "You ain't got the nerve!"

WHEN Milt had reached the point where he could take instruction in the Jenny from Bud Talbot, Bud took the stick away from him after what looked like a nasty spin.

"Milt, you throw the ship on her back in a loop. And you froze to your controls in that spin!" Bud explained patiently.

Milt listened to him with a smirk on his putty face. Obviously he wasn't listening. Bud's eyes flashed.

"Laramy, are you paying attention?" he snapped.

"I don't pay no attention to kids!" Milt snarled.

Bud's lips tightened in a hard line. "Do you realize I could report that insolence?"

Milt's thick lips curled in a snarl. "But you won't! Because you know damn well what I'd do to you if you did! You haven't the nerve!"

"No," corrected Bud with marked emphasis, "that isn't the reason. I won't report an inferior—and I'm a better man than you in every particular, Laramy. Brains, knowledge of the air, knowledge of planes, knowledge of fighting—"

"Everything but guts!" interrupted Milt sarcastically.

Milt created no little excitement when he refused to take his instructions under Bud Talbot the following day. "I won't go jup with that guy!" he insisted doggedly. "I've known him since his salad days. He's got a yellow streak a yard wide down his back and I ain't going up with that kind of bozo! I want to learn from a he-man who knows something about fightin'!"

The sergeant reported him, and Milt was confined to barracks. But the word spread. Bud Talbot lacked nerve. Milt Laramy had said so; and Milt had known Bud since

they were both pups. More and more men requested to have some other pilot than Bud. They liked the boy, but still they didn't want to take any chances.

Sick at heart, Bud reported to Colonel Saunders. The capacious-visaged colonel listened to his request to be transferred to France in silence. Then he rubbed his grizzled chin reflectively.

"Talbot, if you're letting what those men say about you influence you, won't you be verifying their opinions?" he finally demanded.

Bud bit his lip. Then his cherubic face became grim and determined. "I have enough nerve not to care what anyone thinks of me!" he stated heatedly.

A tincture of a smile quirked the colonel's lips. "Good boy!" he said approvingly. "I knew you had! But you're a lot more valuable to us as an instructor than you would be as a fighter."

"I'd like a chance to disprove that, sir!" Bud smiled faintly. And he got it!

MILT got lost going to Sequim when he took his tests.

"You'll need Bud Talbot to pilot you around when you get to France!" Louie Roberts chuckled. "Hell! Getting lost going to Sequim! And there are railroad tracks all the way!"

Milt scowled darkly. "Don't worry about me! Maybe I don't know a lot of silly rules, and maybe I don't know all there is to flying. But when nerve's needed, that stuff won't do you a damn bit of good! Uncle Sam needs real he-men like me—not a bunch of smart-Alec kids like Bud Talbot!"

BUD TALBOT was one of the best students in the advanced course of combat tactics at Issoudun by the time Milt reached there. He tried out daily in the 23-meter Nieuport camera-ship. The camera ship snaps pictures in the same way that a Browning or Vickers will later spew lead. The negative is circled like a target, and if a ship appears in the bull's eye of the negative, you have a direct hit. Bud used to bring in a perfect score on nearly every occasion.

The captain pointed him out to the beginners' class. It rankled sorely with Milt. Especially when the captain said to Milt one day:

"Go and ask Talbot how he does it, Laramy. You're the worst shot on the field!"

Bud had gone to the estaminet. Milt found him on the way back, and stopped him. Milt was seething inside.

"Listen here, mama's boy: Lay off the sharp-shooting! We get bawled out daily because we can't shoot as well as you can. If you don't lay off, I'll do the same thing I did to you when you got smart-Alec in school!"

Bud's wide blue eyes narrowed, flashed fire. "Laramy, you can go to hell!"

Laramy, twice as big and heavy as he was, pounded him to a pulp. But he couldn't make Bud temporize. The next day Bud went up and shot twelve bull's eyes in succession. And when Laramy reported, to find he had a complete series of misses, he was bawled out again, and shown Bud's record. Laramy found Bud on the way to the "Y" library some days later. He confronted him, his face twisted in anger.

"So you had to show off, did you?" he snarled turbulently.

Bud didn't flinch. "If you think I'm going to spoil my record for you or any other man in the army, Laramy, you're crazy! Go ahead—beat me up. You've always been a bully and you're too old to change now! Beat me up. I won't tell! I'm not a poor sport—like you!"

Milt's fists clenched; and then dropped limply to his sides. He couldn't do it! There was something so courageous in Bud's attitude of defiance; something like a chipmunk that will stand up to fight man in preference to deserting its nest.

"All right, mama's boy!" Milt growled surlily. "I'll leave the Germans to fix you! They can take care of guys who ain't got nerve!"

BUD was transferred to the Sixty-seventh Reconnaissance Squadron a few days later. Things were quiet on that sector at the moment. Bud went on frequent patrols but no enemy planes were encountered. And then Milt and Louie followed him to the Sixty-seventh.

One day at a poker game one of the men remarked: "This guy Talbot sure seems anxious to meet the Jerries! He's been beefin' about lack of excitement at the front! Just let him wait! Nothing happens for a week or so—and then hell pops when you least expect it!"

"Don't let him kid you!" Milt growled sarcastically. "He don't want no fight; that's just a bluff. That guy'd get so scared if he saw a Boche that he couldn't shoot anyway! He's as spineless as a jellyfish. Why they let those mama's boys into the aviation corps anyway is beyond me!"

"Lots of things is beyond you. Milt!" chuckled Louie. "His shooting, for one thing!"

"Huh!" Milt drawled disparagingly. "It don't take no nerve to shoot the gun on a camera-ship! That's why he was so cocky!"

Bud began to feel the men change toward him. And he guessed the reason. Milt had lead them to believe he was full of "balloon juice." He attempted to prove to himself and the other men that he had nerve by going on extra patrols. Still nothing happened. The sector remained quiet—like the calm before a storm.

One murky morning Bud went up in a D.H. to stunt above the tarmac. He practiced loops, spins, barrel-rolls and various other maneuvers.

Without warning, three Hun ships dropped from the leaden sky. Bud did not see them until they were almost upon him, two Fokkers and a Pfaltz. His blood froze to ice in his veins as a fiery, licking stream flashed past his tilted right wing-tip. The D.H. pivoted in a complete turn, wing to the sky, wing to the earth below. And in that instant Bud had seen the three diving ships. Down and down they came in a long, curving swoop, their guns blazing.

In a second he had analyzed his chances. They could shoot him down while he was landing. There was nothing to do but stay and fight. He knew he didn't have a dog's chance. Three ships to one, when those three ships had the advantage of position, left too little to chance. Nevertheless, Bud pulled back on his stick, climbing into those withering streams of lead.

BULLETS splashed and tore about the zooming D.H. Bud's heart was in his mouth. His hand on the stick-trigger of his prop-synchronized Vickers as he saw one ship momentarily outlined in the hair-line of his ring-sight. He squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. His gun was jammed!

"Fini!" he formed the word with dry lips.

Bullets sprayed the wings in dozens of places. Bud pushed the nose down in a frantic arc and started to streak for earth. But he knew he'd never make it. Already those three Boche ships must be diving for his blind-spot.

Hungry licking streams streaked out at the diving ship. His heart went cold within him as one funnel of flame worked in on his right wing. He pivoted wildly, pushed the nose down savagely. But still he could hear the rivet-like burst of those machine guns on his tail, still those bullets played dangerously close. And he was

aware that even in a crash landing the Boche would ignite the wreckage with incendiary bullets before he could reach safety.

Mechanics were wheeling out planes. One officer was bellowing orders. Men were manning the archies. But Bud knew all these preparations were futile.

Abruptly those three crimson streaks stopped playing around his ship. Only the whirring of the wind through the struts and wires, the bellow of the engine, and the drone of the propeller sounded in Bud's ears. And then he heard them!

Those typewriters that spell out their ominous messages of death were singing far overhead. Cold beads of perspiration broke out on Bud's forehead. He pulled back on his stick. Looked up. Five French Nieuports were bearing down on the tails of the Boche ships. The Germans were heading eastward.

He saw a greenish-red stream batter in the cockpit of the Fokker. For a moment it hung in a stall, then it plunged, twisting and turning like some great, stricken bird in the throes of death.

The observers were wheeling their mounted Spandaus. Bullets were flashing out of the diving Nieuports. One of them staggered, the nose went down, came up in one last despairing effort, and then sank again, plunging toward earth singing a devil's song.

But the Pfaltz paid penalty for its victory a second later. It swung wildly to get out of range of one leaden stream. And in that moment its cockpit was exposed. A stream of death vomited from the nose of another Nieuport. The Pfaltz burst into flames, streaking toward earth like a burning meteor.

The remaining ship, a Fokker, zoomed. But the four Nieuports still had altitude. Their noses came up slightly. Red streamed out toward the Boche ship. Then it back-slipped, a sickening sight, and went into a tail dive, a dead pilot at the stick.

Bud came down in a stall landing. He was white and shaken at his narrow escape. His knees seemed to wobble like those of a new-born calf as he staggered out of his cockpit. Milt eyed him contemptuously as the greaseballs pushed his ship into the camouflaged hangars.

"Turned tail, didn't you?" Milt demanded caustically. "I knew you were yellow!"

Bud gulped, choked and for a minute seemed to almost strangle. His clenched fists bit into the palms of his hands. "Turned tail!" he cried heatedly. "Of course I turned tail! What else could I do with a jammed gun!"

Milt's thick lips twisted in a sneer. "Yeh? You'll always find some excuse! If your gun hadn't jammed, you would have been so scared you couldn't have used it! Nerve? You ain't got as much nerve as a rabbit! Rules and regulations don't make a man! You've got to have the guts, too, Talbot!"

Bud was seething inwardly. But he knew full-well that in any encounter with this mountain of a bully he could only hope to come out second best. He stared hatred at Milt for a few moments; then turned on his heel.

THE C.O. was a bronzed-faced man with steely-blue eyes and black hair that was sprinkled with gray. Colonel Hansen had had reports of Milt Laramy's castigation of Bud; and one day he called the bully into his office.

"Laramy, I need a man who has nerve to do a dangerous piece of work," he said, eyeing Milt keenly.

Milt glowed, and smiled broadly. "Yes, sir. What do you want me to do, sir?"

The C.O. suppressed a smile. "There are three enemy balloons that have hindered advance on this sector. Do you think you could bag them? One ship might accomplish it; more than one ship would cause word to be flashed along the front, and would cause failure as it has on former occasions."

"It'll be easy, sir!" Milt assured him confidently.

"I don't want you to underestimate the difficulty of this mission, Laramy," the C.O. stated gravely, and went on to explain the location of the balloons on his map.

Milt swaggered out of the C.O.'s office with a broad grin on his face. He paused at Bud's flap-partition, and looked in on the youth, who was reading a book.

"Well, mama's boy! The C.O. has just assigned me the work of bagging three balloons. He assigns the important work to men who have nerve!"

An angry torrent of words leapt to Bud's lips, but he stilled them. After all, maybe Milt was right. The C.O., at least, seemed to think so. Otherwise why would he assign this important work to Milt?

Milt confided in everyone and finally swaggered down the field to take off in a Spad. The brown earth dropped away beneath him as he pushed eastward. Up—up—up he climbed until the cumulus clouds billowed in a fleecy sea of white below him. He occasionally watched the map the C.O. had given him.

But as Milt approached nearer and nearer German territory, his spirits fell. Maybe this wasn't such an

honor after all! He began to scan the sky anxiously. Once he jumped when he thought he saw a black speck far above him. He felt pretty shaky.

"Golly!" he ruminated apprehensively. "What if I should meet a German patrol! They could overtake me before I could reach the drome of the Sixty-seventh! I hear they've got better ships than we have, anyhow!"

At last Milt pushed forward on his stick. The nose dipped. Icy shivers raced down his back. Gosh! he wasn't so experienced at this sort of thing! Bud Talbot had been flying a lot more than he had! But the C.O. must think he was pretty good! Anyway, he had more nerve than Bud!

Milt saw the three balloons some distance to the east. And far beyond those balloons were three black specks. Milt shuddered. He looked at the three balloons and then at the three black dots. They seemed to be growing larger. Milt groaned. To his distorted imagination it seemed there wasn't the slightest hope of accomplishing his mission. He hesitated momentarily, then nosed up into the clouds and retraced his course.

"I couldn't get those balloons, sir!"

Milt reported a short time later. "Three planes were stunting over them, and started after me when I tried to get the balloons. It was hopeless!"

"I didn't expect you would get them, Laramy!" the C.O. declared dryly. "I told you I needed a man with nerve!"

INTELLIGENCE brought word of an impending Zeppelin raid some days later. Its purpose was probably the annihilation of some of the key cities near the front, cities which housed ammunition supplies and from which emanated the orders. If the raid succeeded, the various hangars would also receive their share of the destruction.

The 66th, 67th, and 68th Squadrons supplied ships and men for three flights. It was anticipated that at least twenty-four German ships would be protecting the huge Zeppelin.

At dusk the three V-flights took off like three flocks of migrating birds, eight war birds to a flight. The 68th took off first, and winged upward, for they were to hold the top position in the sky. Next came the 66th. They were to hold middle ground. And finally came the "knight and devil" ships, the 67th.

Holbein was leading this flight of "knight and devil" planes, so called because of the circular insignia which showed a knight on horseback chasing a devil

with his outstretched lance. Bud Talbot had been selected for this flight. And, as an afterthought, so had Milt Laramy, at the C.O.'s request. The C.O. was a fair man. If he had made a mistake in his former judgment of Milt, he was giving him another chance to prove himself.

The three flights held a strategic formation. The middle flight could attack from the fore, while the lower and upper flights could strike from above and below. Up and still up the three V-flights winged their majestic way. Darkness crept over them, broken only by the bluish-white flashes of exhausts stabbing the night like the flicker of a swarm of fire-flies.

Farther and farther they progressed over allied territory. And finally they had crossed the line, and still no sign of that promised Zeppelin and its protectors.

Bud Talbot was tense with excitement as he followed close at Holbein's right hand. Milt Laramy was flying on his right side. The two novices had two of the oldest observers on the field in the planes to equalize their disadvantage of inexperience. Bud had Tierney, a freckled-faced, lean, gum-chewing Irishman; and Milt had Newman, a hard-faced, thin-lipped, unsmiling observer in his rear cockpit.

Before Bud was aware of a foreign presence, he heard the rattling of machine guns far overhead. Holbein flashed his Very signal of attack. The V-flight zoomed suddenly. And then Bud caught sight of a faintly luminous gray shape that loomed weirdly out of the darkness like some giant phantasmagoria. And around the Zeppelin on all sides was a fringe of red and yellow machine-gun fire, the long streamers of licking flame and incendiary bullets, the eerie flash of sputtering exhaust stacks.

Ships were diving for them, coming down in a long, flashing curve, their guns spewing death and destruction as they plummeted down upon the knight and devil planes at one hundred and ten miles an hour. They were climbing into a hailstorm of bullets. The roar of their engines was intensified as the ships pulled upward into that fury of lead.

Bud's hand closed on the stick-trigger of his prop-synchronized Vickers. A streak of bullets flowed from the blunt nose of the Bristol Fighter. One Pfaltz burst into flames, staggered, and then went shrilling earthward like a flaming comet. Suddenly Bud heard an explosion, and saw one D.H.'s prop burst into a million pieces. There was a hideous roar from the released engine, and the D.H. slid backwards. A nauseous sickness gripped Bud's stomach. He swerved

wildly in his upward climb to escape the plunging D.H., and then went higher up.

Abruptly bullets rained about Bud's Bristol, riddling the fabric. He pivoted his ship out of that funnel of flame. As he did so, he saw it diverted to the ship that had been on his right side. Milt Laramy's Spad.

Milt shoved the nose of his Spad down in a sudden dive. But the Fokker was on his tail, flame belching from its nose in a hungry, lashing stream. Newman had swung his bracketed Lewis. Tracers zipped out at the oncoming Fokker. It shifted slightly in its downward course, and still it came on, that stream of death vomiting from its nose.

Newman suddenly staggered, threw up his hands, and sank out of sight in the rear cockpit. Bud flung his Fighter down on the Fokker. Red streamed out of his gun, streamed down toward the Boche ship. It went into a half barrel-roll without relinquishing its position on the Spad's tail. And lead continued to rake the Spad's wings, splintering, wrecking, tearing.

BUD opened his throttle wide, and his eyes behind their owl-like goggles were hard and grim. His ears seemed to be bursting from the speed of his spin. Down and still down he plunged at one hundred and forty miles an hour, while the subdued bellow of the engine rose to a hideous roar, and the wind shrilled through wires and rigging. His hand closed once more on the trigger of his Vickers as he momentarily saw the Fokker outlined in his ring-sight. The gun pounded out bullets in a long burst.

An answering salvo came from the Spandaus in the rear cockpit of the Fokker. Bud's blood seemed to turn to ice. He was diving into the face of that spitting gun. But he had to save Milt Laramy! Milt was twisting and turning in his mad descent, trying to escape the seemingly inevitable death at the hands of that wildly careening Spandaus.

Bud savagely wiped flying grease and mist from his goggles as they plunged through the clouds. For a few moments he couldn't see the flash of the Fokker's gun. Then he saw it again, and his Vickers rattled once more in its song of death. The yawning Spandaus in the rear-cockpit suddenly stopped spattering lead through his badly-riddled wings. The observer staggered, wheeled the Spandaus clumsily, and then reeled forward on his face, dead.

Bud smiled in tight-lipped fashion. That searing flame licked out at the Fokker again. Suddenly it burst

into flames. His gun continued to clatter. Bullets severed the gas-line, and the heart fuel of the Fokker was poured onto the flames. For a moment, it seemed to burn at white heat. The pilot leapt out of the crackling ship. Then it seemed to dissolve in space, the crackling wings dropping away like the wings of a moth that has approached too close to a candle.

And the Spad continued its wild descent. Bud bore down on Milt's ship, hoping to make him realize that he was no longer in danger. But Milt was too thoroughly terrified. He continued on down for two thousand feet more, made a crash landing, and then crawled free of his ship. Bud dipped over him in a long, swooping arc, and piqued his ship for the climb.

THE SHIPS had engaged in separate dog-fights when Bud returned to the scene. Two planes roared at each other, their guns vomiting lead. They struck head-on and went shrieking earthward, twisting and turning in a crazy way, until they were lost to sight beneath the leaden clouds.

A knight and devil ship was caught by two converging fires, and flashed earthward in a sheet of flames. A Rumpler was climbing into a veritable hailstorm of bullets that streaked about her, and then suddenly she was not climbing. A scene of horror and death on every hand. A picture that would be ineradicably painted in Bud's mind's eye as long as he lived.

A Pfaltz leapt downward for him as he climbed for the belly of the Zeppelin, a red stream pouring from her nose. Bud's heart froze within him. He pushed the nose down in a vertical dive. He could hear Tierney's gun clattering in the rear-cockpit.

Down and still down he plunged with that fiery stream flashing about him in its augury of death. Down until he could hear the shrilling and creaking and groaning of strained struts and braces and wires commingling with the scream of the bellowing engine like the chords of an orchestra in hell. Would the Bristol Fighter ever come out of that dive? He pulled back on his stick. He was surprised there was still pressure on his movement of rudder-bar and stick as he got his controls in neutral.

Ten to one the Pfaltz was diving for his blind-spot. He flung the ship up in a sudden zoom as that hungry, licking stream flashed past his tail-fin. His zoom had been in the nick of time. The Pfaltz was unable to check its wild descent. He peered over the side of the cockpit, and could tell by the flash of the Pfaltz'

exhausts that it was leveling out to climb for his blind-spot.

Bud's lips stiffened. He pushed the nose of the Fighter down in a sudden arc. His hand closed on the trigger of his gun. The Pfaltz swerved wildly. And in that moment its cockpit was exposed. Bud emptied his gun into the enemy cockpit, and then pulled back suddenly on his stick. His trucks bit the spot the Pfaltz had occupied a moment before.

But before he had time to think, he could hear Tierney's mounted Lewis rattling. Cold beads of perspiration broke out all over his body as bullets splashed against his instrument board. A spin or a zoom—he had his choice!

He pulled back savagely on his stick. Up and still up he flung his ship, while Tierney's gun opened fire again. In a short, fanning arc, it took its way, as Tierney tried to catch the climbing Albatross. A reddish-yellow stream flashed under the landing gear of the Fighter.

Abruptly Tierney's gun went silent. Qualms seized Bud, and he glanced back hastily. Tierney was slumped forward, blood streaming from his head, his hand still gripping his Lewis gun. Bud's eyes suddenly misted, and he swallowed a lump that rose in his throat. The Albatross was still climbing, her gun belching death and destruction. Her purpose was clear. She was trying to get the Fighter from underneath.

Bud leveled out suddenly, pushing the crate's nose down. He tumbled over and over in a falling leaf, and then went into a dive above the Albatross, his gun clattering. The Albatross swerved frantically, caught unawares. But those deadly bullets tore and smashed all about the enemy cockpit, splintering and wrecking, while the Albatross staggered, fought upward, hesitated, and then let her nose go down in a last despairing effort.

He licked his lips unconsciously, like an animal that has tasted blood and is thirsty for more. He nosed up into the clouds again. There was a diminished flicker of fire-flies in the sky, but the Zeppelin, unable to move without its protectors, was still the center of that fighting melee. About her the enemy ships were engaged in death-grips. But the German ships still protected the Zeppelin from above and below at the cost of their lives.

Bud suddenly started. A Pfaltz was climbing for the tail of a D.H. that was at death-grips with a Fokker. He started upward, his hand steady on the stick-trigger of his gun. But he saw he would be too late to save the DeHaviland. The Boche ship shot away its tail-fin as the Fokker battered in its cockpit.

Bud squeezed the trigger of his gun. The Pfaltz dived to get clear of that withering stream of lead. Bud bore down on his tail, his gun spitting death. And then his heart stood still as a spatter of lead flew all about him from behind. At the same time, the Spandaus in the rear cockpit belched lead.

A SUDDEN arrow of pain darted down his arm, and the crimson sky reeled about his head. He tried to dissipate that swimming dizziness in his head by a sheer effort of will. But the Pfaltz was swimming before his bleary eyes, his hand was shaking on his gun.

He did a half barrel-roll to escape that clattering gun in his rear, without losing his advantageous position on the tail of the Pfaltz. Once more his gun belched flame at the diving Boche. Its dive became a plunge as it went streaking earthward in a mass of flames.

Bud's whole body became numb from that searing pain in his left arm. But he managed to pull back on the stick, straighten out the ship and zoom. At the top of his zoom, he went into an Immelmann turn. It reversed his position, and he came roaring back at the surprised Fokker. For a moment those two tore head-on.

Then the Fokker staggered, and Bud pulled back fiercely on his stick to avoid a head-on collision. He went into another Immelmann, but when he came roaring back again the Fokker had gone into a nose dive, the pilot slumped over his stick.

Bud's muddled head was clearing as he streaked for the ceiling at a stiff zoom. A Rumpler was climbing for his tail, but he pushed his nose down at the apotheosis of his climb and poured lead into the cockpit of the climbing ship. It back-slipped, and then tumbled over and over as it flip-flopped earthward with the siren-like bellow of its engine rising to a hideous crescendo.

For the moment, he was free. He scanned the skies like a hawk looking for its prey, and then he took a deep breath.

"It may be the last breath I'll take!" he thought grimly.

Then he pushed the nose down. Faster than the wind, he roared down at that great, grey mass looming far below him. He squeezed the trigger of his Vickers. A leaden stream of incendiaries reached out at the big bag.

Instantly he was the center of a maelstrom of bullets that swirled about him from all sides. His heart

was in his mouth. Yet he held to his mad dive with the tenacity of a bulldog, his gun spitting flame into the large gray mass that spread below him.

Two planes were climbing for him, their guns pouring bullets through his wings. He shifted to avoid a head-on collision with one of them. But the other ship, a Pfaltz, was still climbing, her gun streaking fire.

Bud got his sights as he dropped. For a split-second the Pfaltz was outlined in his ring-sight. He squeezed the trigger. The Pfaltz burst into flames. The pilot tried to direct his course away from the Zeppelin he had been protecting, but he had too little leeway. He plunged into the gray mass, his burning plane eating a hole in the side of the Zeppelin as a match burns a hole in tissue-paper.

Then the whole sky turned a vivid red as the Zeppelin exploded. It sucked in the protecting planes with the insatiable greed of death itself. The reverberations from that explosion rang in Bud's ears for minutes. Then that hissing, flaming inferno painted a blazing path down the sky, finally dropping out of sight beneath the black clouds, leaving only clouds of black smoke as a reminder of its fate.

As if by mutual accord the Boche planes turned tail. For them this had been a disastrous day. A priceless Zeppelin had been lost, an offensive in the air had been broken. Of those four and twenty blackbirds that had started the fight, only seven remained. The Yank ships did not attempt pursuit. They had eleven ships left, but they were sick and weary of these terrible minutes of battle that had seemed like hours. The disorganized flights began to limp westward.

NOW that the battle had ended, Bud had the first opportunity to think of Milt Laramy. Somewhere down there on German territory Milt was laying—perhaps wounded. He was no friend of Bud's, but he was a Yank. And Bud couldn't stand the thought of leaving him there if there was any chance of saving him.

He pushed through the clouds, finally coming to a broad expanse of green that was dimly outlined in the Stygian darkness. Finally he thought he saw the smoldering embers of the Fokker he had downed when he had saved Milt's life.

He knew he was risking all in a night landing; but he pushed the nose down in a long glide, pulled back on his stick when he saw the dimly-outlined earth rushing up at him, and eased on the stick when the ship seemed about to back-slip. He bounced thirty

feet, struck heavily, bounced ten feet, and then came to a stop. Bud climbed out of the ship on shaking limbs.

"My gosh!" he murmured. "I'll bet there isn't anything left of my landing gear!"

He was astonished to find it was still intact.

Then he turned to find Milt. After some time, he was attracted by the sound of moaning and groaning. Milt was laying where he had fallen after climbing out of his Spad. He groaned more loudly when Bud appeared.

"Are you wounded?" Bud demanded anxiously.

"Wounded!" exploded Milt. "I'm dying! I'm shot through the head, and I think I'm all busted up inside!" Bud helped him to the crate. Milt was almost sobbing with pain at every step. Bud took off and some time later landed at the drome of the 67th. One of the men rushed up to his plane as he shut off his engine on the dead-line. He tried to be dignified; but his voice was shaking with eagerness.

"Say, Bud, Holbein's made a report on your bagging of the Zeppelin, and the C.O. wants to see you immediately. He told Holbein that you're due for a promotion!"

"I can't see him now!" Bud muttered grimly. "Help me with Milt, Hedges. He says he's dying!" And at the door of the doctor's office: "Tell the C.O. I'll see him as soon as we get Milt fixed up!"

Milt talked constantly as the doctor and Bud bandaged up a slight scalp wound. The doctor, a methodical, efficient-looking individual, searched for further injuries. Milt was a bit bruised; but his only wound was that slight one on his scalp.

"I told you it took real men to win this war!" Milt sputtered aggressively. "Oh! look out, doc—you're

killing me! Careful, there—I think there's a hole clear through my head! And I'm all busted up inside!"

Milt continued to moan and groan after the bandaging was finished. Bud put away the bandages and his hand was shaking as he laid the adhesive tape on the table.

"Look at him, doc! No nerve at all! His hands are shaking and his face is white—all because of a little blood! I go out and get wounded, and I'm not half as pale as he is!"

THE doctor's lips compressed in a firm line, and he said nothing. "All finished, doctor?" Bud demanded in a voice he tried to control. "Would you mind fixing up a little wound I got in the scrimmage? Hurry, please, I've got to go on dawn patrol this morning!"

Bud removed his coat. His sleeve was clotted with blood, and his arm swollen to enormous proportions. The doctor's eyes narrowed appraisingly, and his lips pursed.

"This is serious, boy! I'd better send you back to the base hospital and keep you there for a few weeks! It looks like a break!"

Bud shook his head determinedly. "No; it's not broken! And I can't spare the time to go back to the base hospital; we're too short of men now as it is! Hurry, please. I've got to see the C.O. before I go on that dawn patrol!"

The doctor's lips tightened. He eyed the big fellow scornfully. "Short of men is right!" he grunted. "If we had many big babies like this Laramy guy in the army, we'd have to have a flock of nurses to keep 'em from crying!"